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ABSTRACT

This ERIC Digest briefly reviews studies of maternal employment, child care settings, and links between children's development and family and child care influences. Studies of maternal employment suggest that infants' positive relationships with caregivers may compensate for insecure attachments with mothers. If future research supports this conclusion, the stability and characteristics of the infant child care caregiver will assume great importance. Some research suggests that infants and toddlers cared for by responsive and sensitive caregivers have higher cognitive and language scores and greater social competence than do children who receive care from less responsive and less sensitive caregivers. Several features of the child care environment are linked to caregiver sensitivity and responsiveness. These include formal training in child development, a small number of children to care for, the number of adults in the caregiving environment, short hours, decreased responsibility for housework, and environments designed to be safe and appropriate for children. Research evidence does not suggest that infant child care per se is detrimental to the child's future social and emotional development. Research does raise concerns for the child who experiences insensitive care both at home and in child care. (RH)

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ERIC Digest

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Infant Child Care

Carollee Howes

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Close to half of all mothers of children under one year of age are now working outside of their homes. Their children are cared for by relatives, by in-home caregivers, and in family day care homes and centers. Family day care is the most common out-of-home child care arrangement for infants, but the proportion of infants in center care is steadily increasing (Hofferth and Phillips, 1987).

Recent debate has focused on the possibility that children enrolled in out-of-home child care as infants are at risk for later social and emotional development (Belsky, 1988; Clarke-Stewart, 1988). This ERIC Digest will evaluate the evidence concerning infant child care as a risk for children's social and emotional development.

Studies of Maternal Employment

Studies of the effects of maternal employment on the security of the child's attachment to the mother form the primary research base for the assertion that infant child care constitutes a risk for children. Security of attachment is commonly assessed with the Ainsworth Strange Situation (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978) when the child is approximately 1 year old. The Strange Situation is a 20-minute laboratory procedure that involves repeated separations from the mother and the infant's being left with a friendly stranger.

Sixteen recent studies that used this assessment method showed that infants of full-time employed mothers were more likely to exhibit an insecure maternal attachment relationship than infants of part-time employed and non-employed mothers (Belsky, 1988; Clarke-Stewart, 1988). It is important to recognize that even though more infants of full-time employed mothers were classified as insecure, well over half (Belsky: 59%; Clarke-Stewart: 63%) of the infants of full-time employed mothers have been classified as securely attached.

On the basis of this research, Belsky (1988) concluded that full-time infant child care prior to the first birthday puts children at risk for later development. Alternative interpretations focus on the psychological meaning of the Strange Situation assessment to the infant who has experienced child care. The experiences of separation of infants in child care centers and family day care homes differ from those of infants not enrolled in child care. We do not know if the former infants find the Strange Situation less stressful than the latter.

One problem with the research linking maternal attachment security and maternal employment is that it provides little information about the kind of alternative care experienced by the infant. We know that infants become attached to their alternative caregivers (Howes, Rodning, Galluzzo, & Myers, 1988). We also know that the quality of the child's attachment to the mother does not predict the quality of the child's attachment to the alternative caregiver (Howes and others, 1988). A child with an insecure maternal attachment relationship may have a secure attachment relationship with an alternative caregiver.

These studies suggest that positive relationships with infant child care caregivers may compensate for insecure maternal attachments. If future research supports these conclusions, the stability and characteristics of the infant child care caregiver will assume great importance.

Studies of Child Care Settings

Mothers who are responsive and sensitive—that is, who respond consistently and appropriately to their child's social bids and initiate interactions geared to the child's capacities, intentions, moods, goals, and developmental level—are most likely to have children with secure maternal attachments (Belsky, Rovine, and Taylor, 1984). One can assume that this is also true for alternative caregivers. Some research suggests that in infant child care, infants and toddlers with more responsive and sensitive caregivers have higher cognitive and language scores and greater social competence (Rubenstein & Howes, 1983).

Several features of the child care environment are linked to caregiver sensitivity and responsiveness. These are: formal training in child development on the part of the caregiver, few children to care for and many adults in the room, short hours, decreased responsibility for housework, and environments designed to be safe and appropriate for

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children (Howes & Stewart, 1987). As might be expected, caregivers who work in high quality child care settings can be more responsive and sensitive to the infants in their care than caregivers with less desirable conditions. Infants and toddlers in high quality child care are more likely than children in low quality care to be securely attached to caregivers (Howes and others, 1988), to engage in competent social interaction with adults and peers (Howes and Stewart 1987), to self-regulate (Howes and Olenick, 1986), and to have high language and cognitive scores (Goelman & Pence, 1987).

Studies Linking Children's Development to Family and Child Care Influences

Despite constraints on parental choice of child care, several studies report that families who provide appropriate care in their homes tend to select good child care. Parents who are stressed (Howes and Stewart, 1987), lead complex lives (Howes and Olenick, 1986), lack social supports (Howes and Stewart, 1987), and lack developmentally appropriate child rearing practices and values (Howes & Stewart, 1987), are more likely to enroll their child in low quality than in high quality child care. Mothers whose infants are classified as insecurely attached enroll their infants in family day care homes that have a higher than average number of children per caregiver (Howes and others, 1988).

A few studies have attempted to compare the relative influences of family and child care on the development of infants in child care. These suggest that the combination of child care and family influences best predicts the social development of the infant (Howes & Olenick, 1986; Howes and Stewart, 1987; Howes, 1988). Infants and toddlers in high quality care and cared for by families low in stress and high in social support and developmentally appropriate child rearing values and practices were more socially competent (Howes and Stewart, 1987). Children with a history of high quality care inside and outside the family were better able to adjust to first grade than children with less fortunate care and family histories (Howes, 1988).

Research evidence does not suggest that infant child care per se is detrimental to the child's future social and emotional development. It does raise concerns for the child who experiences insensitive care both at home and in child care.

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